

A WILD ROAD TO NIRVANA



Geranium pratense



Primula reidii



Primula obtusifolia

Twenty years of guiding have given me (and Basak) a wealth of memories and an incredible life experience in wild places. There are always some favourites and stand out trips; Lake Van, Chile, Kogelberg in South Africa, the Tien Shan, Yunnan, lilies in Japan....I could go on. Others are this and set different bench marks. North-west India is very much one of these.

India itself is a remarkable destination a constant sensory bombardment from colours and noise to amazing cuisine. And the Himalayas of Himachal Pradesh are stunning and a floral feast. I have been fortunate to visit twice and the two seasons were very different. Both times I stayed at the simply gorgeous Neealaya villas, beautifully crafted from local stone and recycled cedar wood - indeed the hills all around Manali are swathed in wonderful stands of this (*Cedrus deodara*) and *Picea smithiana*, both gracefully weeping trees. The first visit saw me drive up to the Rothang La and stride out across flowering turf, eventually finding screes with the amazing woolly balls of *Sassaurea gossypiphora* growing with tight mats of *Androsace delvavayi*. Golden *Corydalis meifolia* and countless anemones coloured the slopes. On the way up to the pass I'd also stopped for crevices full of the lovely creamy bells of *Primula reidii*, surely one of the

Sinopodophyllum hexandrum





Potentilla biflora



Saussurea gossypiphora & *Androsace delvayi*



Iris kemaensis

most gorgeous primulas to be seen anywhere.

Fast forward a year and it couldn't be more different - there had been an unprecedented amount of snow and the very same pass was under metres of the stuff on the very same day. There was no option but to go up and over, passing beleaguered workers with the seemingly impossible task of shoring up a road that was being washed away as fast as they worked. There was the compensation of the violet-spotted flowers of *Iris kemaensis* and in the drier valleys floriferous bushes of *Rosa webbiana*, stands of yellow *Morina coulteriana* and passing beneath waterfalls the slopes above were sprinkled with the lurid pink of *Primula rosea* - the well-known garden favourite.

The Lahaul Valley is truly spectacular, but the journey through it is along a remarkable road, that often barely resembles a road. Instead, a rutted, wet dirt road winds its way along passing through glacial rivers that seem impossible to cross. Indeed, we passed several marooned vehicles, bogged in the mud or broken as we pass through immense snow banks higher than the trucks that rumbled along the road.

The disappointments of Rohtang La began to fade when we started to find the good stuff. On one occasion a landslide meant we had to turn around and try a side road and it was along this that we found a stunning spire of *Meconopsis*

aculeata. The next day they had cleared the route to the giddy 4800-metre Baralacha La, home of big cushions of *Potentilla biflora* and rivers of *Primula minutissima* (the photo of *Potentilla biflora* is from my first visit - this place would have been under snow the following year). The landscape was stunning, but there again it always was up here. In the days that followed various passes were crossed as we made it to the Spiti Valley were drifts of *Aquilegia fragrans* lined the banks and irrigated patches and *Geranium pratense* and *Codonopsis clematidea*. There was brief stand-off in our hotel with a group of bikers who wanted our rooms for the night, we held our nerve and the calm of emanating from precariously placed monasteries returned the land to Zen as they rode off in cloud of disgruntled dust. Perhaps the fact we had padlocked the doors with our own locks had helped too!

There followed a journey along a road like no other; mainly single track with countless blind bends, passing huge rock overhangs, rock falls, boulders and livestock to avoid. And then there were the flocks of wild blue sheep on the slopes above dislodging rocks that whizzed like missiles across the road. Our skilled driver took it all completely in his stride with an eyebrow raised. He eventually discharged us



Aquilegia fragrans



Meconopsis aculeatum



Primula rosea



Paraquilegia microphylla

in the Sangla from where we undertook a four-day trek into the hills. Day one saw arrival at what was affectionately termed 'dung camp' so thick was the layer of donkey dung that was spread about! Nonetheless it was a fun, flower-filled trip. The next day found fabulous clumps of *Sinopodophyllum hexandrum* - closely followed by a drenching storm. But our final outing was one of those memorable walks that justify the efforts one has put in. Countless millions of *Primula minutissima* quite literally carpeted the ground as we climbed, reaching a boulder field that we were then crazy-enough to cross finding the lovely *P. obtusifolia* nestled among the rocks. On the opposite side of the boulders and 4200 metre ridge line took us across the landscape with amazing views and then the cherry on the cake crags packed with a lovely blue form of *Paraquilegia microphylla*. It was one of those glorious days you really didn't want to come down from. And our knees were quite happy not to, but descend we must, wading the odd stream (wonderfully cooling for the feet) on the way.

Back in civilisation butter chicken curries and cold beer eased any aches. And blessed tarmac now stayed with us to the end.

Mountain road (!) Indian style

